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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recommitments and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of Leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines


Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to editor.platypusreview@gmail.com. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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About the Platypus Affiliated Society

The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the "Old" (1920s–30s) "New" (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

A portrait of Chris Hann, a British scholar. He is an older man with grey hair, wearing a light-colored suit jacket, a white shirt, and a blue tie. He is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The background is a blurred green, suggesting an outdoor setting.

the other side of the Atlantic Ocean). If the left in America is distorting the meaning of Marxism, the liberal technocrats of the Middle East and Europe act as if Marxism does not exist. They see the European model of civil society not as a means towards overcoming the capitalist state but as a goal for which the state is necessary to maintain.

In that sense, the Euro-Mediterranean "Fukuyaman" project is akin to its Eastern European counterpart. British scholar Chris Hann reveals the tendencies of the Left in that context: "From the point of view of an NGO activist in, say, Tbilisi, or for that matter in Moscow, it is all so unfair. Like liberal Eurocrats in Brussels, these activists *believe* in Europe and a Western model of 'civil society'. One might almost say that this is their church. But the current policies of the EU make such ideals ever more illusory. They function instead to consolidate the worst elements of the Soviet legacies."

The European project, and its spinoffs in the adjacent regions, are therefore a result of the Atlanticist bureaucratization of the anti-fascist Popular Front. This in turn led to a new anti-communist popular front during the Cold War, which paradoxically copied the methods of anti-Western Stalinism but in the other direction.

Maybe the only sound viewpoint theory is one that its Brave New (liberal) World to escape reality, and their intellectual battles, not their identity. In that sense, Cutrone is a valuable resource on the pathological psyche of the vanguard which is supposed to build socialism (but once again, criticizing that viewpoint would amount to punching down on the students in Gaza). But Cutrone also tells his audience that there is a world outside of the classroom, and indeed, there is a world outside of our intellectual battles with the New Left and its Millennial mentor. And battles, could be complementary here.

As a matter of fact, the New Left needs Palestine more than Palestine needs it. Palestine is the only issue that neoliberalism – embraced by New Leftists – has not solved. We are still living in the pre-1968 world of “take rule.” We are still, every person of color, every person of every sexuality, and every person of all sizes are still oppressed because the Palestinians are still oppressed. The real Oceanic permanent boot on the face that is Palestine is the drug of soma that the New Left takes in



On the other side of the aisle, Cutrone does not adopt the vices of his opponents even when he criticizes Hamas. For him, Hamas is not Islamist, Oriental, Nazi, or otherwise; it's simply bourgeois. It's a bourgeois organization with political-economy relations with Arab countries, Iran, Israel, and the United States. But in an environment where criticizing Israel amounts to punching down on the Jews and Palestinian Hamas amounts to punching down on the Palestinians, Cutrone's scientific diagnosis is utterly rejected. Hamas is not a bourgeois organization because it is a group of freedom fighters/monsters/people from heaven/Hitler to liberate the Palestinian people/commit the second Holocaust.

All that said, I have to disagree with Cutrone's categorization of solidarity with Palestinian self-determination as *necessarily* an identical acceptance of capitalist politics, and I have to disagree with the subsequence implication that this solidarity is a hegemonic, official, and elite ideology in Western Europe and North America. We can be more accurate by saying that Palestinian solidarity is not "the elite ideology, but an" ideology of a niche elite; the New Left, which is the milieu of Cutrone and the place where he has chosen to fight his intellectual battles. Indeed, pro-Palestine popular frontism has been discredited and hollowed out of its essence in every conceivable way by both its opponents and proponents. It became the piped-in from the anti-authoritarianism of Noam Chomsky in the 1970s to the ultra-authoritarianism of Judith Butler these days. It became a movement that abandoned Kautsky and Lenin's historical material conception of anti-imperialism and went towards another conception based upon an identitarian Clash of Civilizations. It is a movement that lives off the romantic legacies of Nayef Hawatmeh and George Habash, while the PFLP and DFLP can't get two electoral seats at the Birzeit University student government elections, and while Palestinian Millennials and Zoomers, who call themselves Marxists, and who are supposed to build and grow the above-mentioned political parties, are either becoming neo-Islamists (the same way many French liberals are neo-Catholics), or they are busy with writing their pronouns in emails because they

First of all, there is nothing you are going to offer [yourselves] out. There is nothing you have to offer, you don't bring anything, you bring these fake women's empowerment programs and workshops to countries around the world. You are not building airports, ports, and schools. I mean they will do these little tiny projects, but they are not doing very much. Secondly, you bring this racist, dominating attitude. Joseph Borrell, the EU foreign policy chief said: "A few months ago, that Europe is a garden and the rest of the world is a jungle, and people in Africa, people in Asia and People in the Arab World, don't want that, thank you. We do not want Europeans coming from their garden and telling us how civilized they are and what we have to do, in order to get civilized like them; we tried that in the 19th century and the 20th century and no, thank you, we do not want to go back to that."

— Ali Abunimah, the founder of *The Electronic Intifada*

THREE DAYS BEFORE OCTOBER 7, my interview with Douglas Lain was released under the title "Are We All Terrorists Today?" In the interview, I said that the armed attacks against free speech at the *Charlie Hebdo* newspaper in 2015, robbed Marxists of their own capacity for free speech, of their ability for ruthless scientific criticism against *Charlie Hebdo* and even the French capitalist state, in that sense, I do understand Chris Cuturen's frustration with Israeli state terrorism, as it leads to the constriction of his capacity to criticize Hamas ruthlessly. Cuturen has a nous and understanding of the nature of attacks on free speech. Not only do these attacks suppress the individual, but they also forcibly redefine their whole identity. As a social critic, like Trumpism, Zionism, and even Islamism, without being an evangelist of these ideas. Nobody bats an eye when Cuturen reiterates an Islamic point of view, but once he opens his mouth on Trumpism and Zionism, he is reframed as a Trumpist and a Zionist. This is because the left's Stalinist enemy/friend distinction between individuals and groups requires a lazy and rushed categorization of Cuturen.

Fakhry Al-Serdawi!

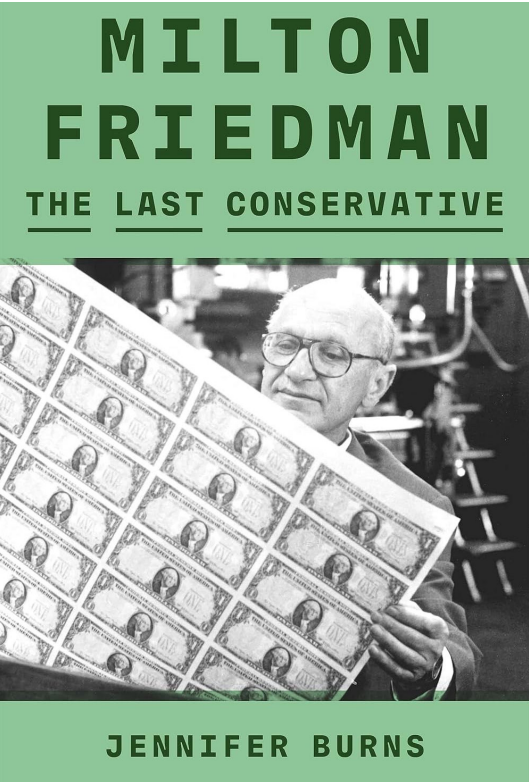
In defense of Palestinian populism



We are all Friedmanites now!

A review of Jennifer Burns's *Milton Friedman*

Chris Cutrone



Jennifer Burns, *Milton Friedman: The Last Conservative* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023).

MILTON FRIEDMAN FAMOUSLY DECLARED, on the threshold of the neoliberal revolution he helped usher in, “We are all Keynesians now!” Also around this time, Michel Foucault said that “We are all Marxists now.” The point was to thus thrust aside, by treating as safely past, something longstanding as a banality that could be ignored — as Marx said the Young Hegelians had done to Hegel. Friedman, like Hegel, might be wrongly overlooked by subsequent generations as a “dead dog.” Jennifer Burns, in her monumental biography, *Milton Friedman: The Last Conservative* (2023), wants to do the opposite: make us recognize the enduring power of Friedman’s ideas in our current post-neoliberal moment, even and precisely when we might think we are past them. Burns quotes Joe Biden from his 2020 campaign for President that, “Milton Friedman isn’t running the show anymore!” But the question then would be, “Who is?” Burns’s point is not that Friedman still is, but that perhaps he should be. But it is not the Friedman most people know. If we are haunted by Friedman, it is not his fault but ours. So the challenge is to read Friedman against the grain of his own and subsequent history, in terms of unfulfilled potential.

For it is not only the case that Friedman’s profound legacy will remain with us concretely in the ongoing practices we inevitably inherit from neoliberalism in multiple and manifold domains, but also in our thinking; and not merely as undigested, unreflected and unconscious repetition, but at the level of the truth of his vision. We might remain with Friedman because he was right. And not simply in terms of what he grasped about capitalism, but as he tasks us to change it. So it is not a matter of how he was wrong or right in this or that issue. Friedman’s thought might see beyond his time — and ours.

This is what Friedman himself meant about Keynes. Part of the problem is that we treat Friedman as an intellectual figure opposed to Keynes rather than growing out of him. We are misled to do so by considering matters merely in terms of policies and polarized differences. As his biographer writes, “his work lies at the intersection of fundamental problems that will never be solved and ongoing tensions that will never be eased” (481). Neither Keynes nor Friedman had their desired programs fulfilled. They were taken up only partially in policy, and so, in important respects, not at all. This is what makes them pertinent to us, still: to not forget what they wanted, and recall their incomplete projects. Friedman declaring himself a Keynesian meant that he wanted to fulfill Keynes better than he had been able to achieve himself. In becoming common sense, Keynes was betrayed. The same has now happened to Friedman. The attempt to discard Friedman, as Burns writes, “betrays an anxiety” that implicitly acknowledges “how fundamental Friedman’s style of economic analysis and his skepticism about government regulation have become to liberals as well as conservatives” (475).

The same had happened earlier with Keynes and his cohort of reformers of mid-20th century capitalism. Their ideas were not enacted so much as used to authorize the designs of others. In Keynes’s case, this involved ignoring his decided internationalism, indeed cosmopolitanism, in favor of nationalist economic projects. Because Friedman is associated with neoliberal globalization leading to socioeconomic disparities and hierarchies within rather than between countries, we might forget, as Burns is anxious to remind us, Friedman’s egalitarian concerns. But not directed against the rich — whose wealth he considered incidental — but rather in favor of the poor, whose condition is the true index of the wealth and health of society. This is why for Friedman the latter were to be the true beneficiaries of his policies apparently favoring the former, the infamous “rising tide that raises all boats” we are tempted to mock — at our peril. There is still a crisis of capitalism.

How this apparently “reversed” Keynes has become obscure to us today: Keynes recognized that the only meaningful variable in the economy was the money in the hands of the working class as consumers; the amount of money as capital in the hands of the rich investors was by comparison secondary and of little effect. (Keynes’s observation was confirmed in the recent Great Recession investment drought, in which the capitalists were for a significant time sitting on their money and failing to invest their capital.) This was the difference between so-called “supply-side” economics ostensibly advocated by Friedmanite neoliberalism

versus the “demand-side” approach attributed to Keynes. But, looked at more closely, the supposed “social welfare” aspect of Keynesianism vs. the more limited and technical “monetarist” (money-supply) concern of Friedmanism disappears: both are varieties of monetary policy; both are based on desire for freeing up money-capital to grease the stuck wheels of the economy. Keynes and Friedman agreed on the basic nature of the problem, and they even agreed fundamentally on the solution.

But circumstances change, and so do the implications at the level of policy implementation. Just as Burns observes that Friedman’s solutions remain operant in today’s proposed post-neoliberal policies, it was true back in his day that the neoliberal revolution was a continuation in its essentials of Keynesian economics. Burns is not unsympathetic to Friedman, even while her biography of him reads as a forensic case against him as much as a tragicomedy of Friedmanism’s follies. In her account, Friedman appears most clueless precisely when he’s seemingly in the driver’s seat. Her narrative of Pinochet’s Chile — Friedman’s most notorious affair — depicts a dictator interested neither in Friedman’s goals nor his philosophy, and former students calling upon the master to endorse them in doing what they wanted to do anyway. As Burns writes, “How important was Friedman’s visit to shaping economic policy in Chile? As it turns out, the decision to shift away from gradualism had already been taken by the time he arrived. . . . To brace the government for what was to come, the Chicago Boys had flown in a ringer” (368). Their honoring him hardly affirmed his thought, but served only to make him culpable — not that Friedman was guileless.

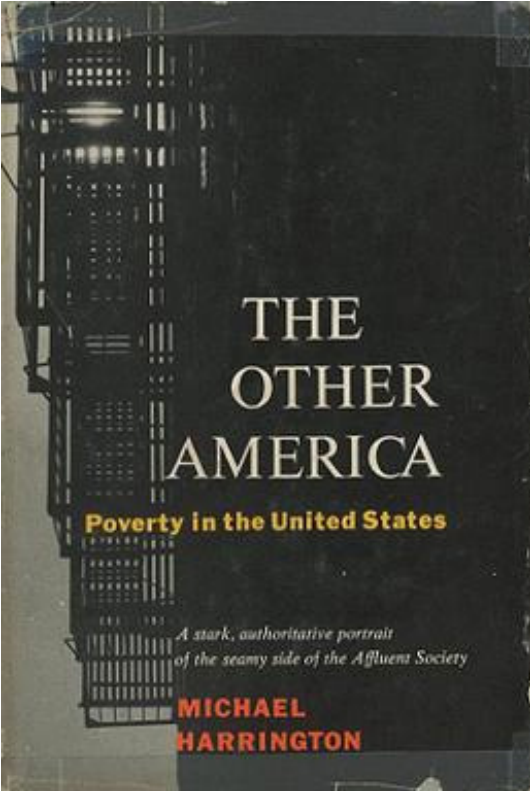
The epigraph with which Burns begins her book is telling in this respect: that Friedman’s “ideas were lying around” when the policy-crisis came in the 1970s, but their “impossibility” becoming “inevitability” was more in serving as an opportunist rationalization rather than a genuine historical triumph. If Friedman was guilty of anything, it was not for his ideas but in allowing them to be misused.

What about MMT (Modern Monetary Theory), then — is this the “idea lying around” in the current crisis and transition to a form of capitalism after neoliberalism? Is it Keynesian? Is it Friedmanite? Paradoxically, although it is called “modern,” its foundational roots in economic thinking are actually more than a century old, predating both mid-20th century Keynesianism and subsequent Friedmanite neoliberalism. Like both of them, however, MMT is “heterodox” — a departure from reigning orthodoxy — and yet is still recognizable according to existing thinking. Like prior orthodoxies that started out as heresies, it might be taken up only in a partial and not total way.

For Friedman never did cease playing the part of a “pixie or pest” to which he had been consigned before his long-belated official recognition. To the end, in life he remained a gadfly with a twinkle in his eye rather than a revered authority. In this respect he was very much like another seeming titanic figure of the New Right, William F. Buckley, Jr., founder of *National Review*. Their faces might have been plastered all across the public square, their voices ringing in everyone’s ears — both, notably, through the medium of the television screen — but this cannot be equated with the real power of their ideas: was anyone actually listening to them, or hearing only what they wanted them to say? Bestowing laurels is the surest way to silence the critic, since the public can consider their case to have been won — and thus closed.

One way of understanding how and why Friedman’s desired program was implemented only in part — or by half — is to find the tension, perhaps even contradiction, between “free markets” and “upward redistribution” of income. In neoliberal capitalism, we might have gotten only the latter and not the former — and under the former’s mere banner.

So the question is, why was there a need to redistribute income upwards in the crisis of the 1970s, after the preceding period’s by comparison greater economic “egalitarianism”? Especially considering that Friedman’s own aims were to raise the wealth of society as a whole — primarily that of the working class — which he thought was hampered precisely by the mistaken established “Keynesian” policies.



The cover of Michael Harrington, *The Other America* (1962)

Burns notes that the specter of unemployment had already reared its head in the 1960s, with the later founder of the DSA (Democratic Socialists of America), Michael Harrington’s book, *The Other America*,

published in the early 1960s, around the time of the greatest tax breaks — enacted by JFK — before those of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. The issue was how the desired economic growth — Keynesian “growth liberalism” — failed to materialize in the 1960s, shifting the issues to other domains. By the end of the 60s, the crisis leading to neoliberalism started to manifest.

Burns points to the scourge of “automation,” whose effects of “deindustrialization” were most glaringly seen after the 1970s, having already emerged much earlier, in the aftermath of WWII. This is where Friedman was already on the case at the time in the 1940s–50s, his investigations auguring the policy needs that would not be fully felt until the late 1960s. Burns touches on the ways the 1930s New Deal had neglected and bypassed a great deal of African-American poverty, which became salient in the climax of the Civil Rights era and Great Society expansions of the New Deal, and recognizes that this was Friedman’s concern as well — paving the way to post-Civil Rights policies in the era of neoliberalism such as “charter-school” voucher program public education reform, against the government-monopoly teachers-union “closed shop” education rackets that Friedman thought kept the teachers’ wages down as well as doing a disservice to their “consumers,” the families whose children were being educated there.

This is where Friedman’s post-Keynesian character enters the picture, in the form of a UBI (Universal Basic Income) “negative income tax,” which, again, was only partially implemented later, as the “Earned Income Tax Credit” innovation of the Reagan era. But the UBI, then as now, was directed at the problem of automation as well as redistribution, and potential stagnation due to Keynesian “under-consumption.” The problem, in Burns’s account, was regarding the lack of desired spending in the economy: was it by consumers or rather by “business” — producers? Of course it is both, as workers are producers as well as consumers, albeit as employees of strapped-for-capital firms faced with the prospect of layoffs or potential expansion: how can government policies help or hinder employers to hire more workers? It is not simply a matter of providing a freer and hence more open market — as Friedman himself well knew.



Official portrait of Jack Kemp

Burns retails the story of Jack Kemp’s rise in Congress during the 1970s, and then serving a pivotal role in Reagan’s tax cuts of the 1980s, as representing a constituency hard-hit by unemployment, and how his policies of refunding of homeowner property taxes as well as business-owner expenses sought to apply Friedmanite remedies to get capital flowing again. The issue is the ambiguous socioeconomic “middle class” — those who are neither rich nor poor. What are the political limitations inherent in such a conception of the core of society, in which the role of producer and consumer is mixed? The problem of maintaining asset value, whether business or private (e.g., homes) was made shockingly apparent by the rampant inflation in which Friedman’s “monetarist” ideas found a hearing in the 1970s.

This problem of depreciation via economic crisis back in the 1970s seems to foreshadow the more recent housing bubble in the 2008 financial crash leading to the Great Recession. But the return of 1970s–80s era inflation is now coming after, rather than before, the initial shock, depending on how and when one sees it. If Friedman’s prescription, otherwise dismissed by contemporaries as “voodoo economics,” appeared to have shrewdly corrected for the stubborn and beguiling “stagflation” of the late 1970s — economic stagnation combined with inflation — back then, today the opposite problem presents itself: Friedmanite economics producing inflation and menacing us chimerically with an as-yet unseen stagnation. Whereas then Friedman’s approach was dangerous as untried innovation, today it has become threatening as doxa. The deeper question is, when were the seeds planted for the manifest economic crisis? For Friedman it was in the post-WWII era, long predating the currency of his ideas in the 1970s. Similarly, today the problem appears to have been sown back in the 1980s–90s heyday of neoliberalism itself. For the depreciation of capital, both business and consumer assets, if merely in earning potential — including in children depending on inheriting their parents’ home value — is what is expressed in the monetary inflation.

Then, as now, the problem of implementing policy is marshaling enough of an electorate to support it. Of course demagoguery is inevitably involved in democracy — voters don’t really understand what they are voting for. But the question is, do politicians truly know the policies they are advocating?

Burns’s story of the origins and paradoxical “triumph” of Milton Friedman’s thought provides a great deal to consider regarding capitalism and its past and current travails. What we have in Burns’s biography is the narrative of the journey of a thought from a preceding era succeeding in a later time. This is appropriate insofar as a subsequent crisis of capitalism is prepared by the character of

the previous boom period. What was propitious in one time proves pernicious in another.

But we must be careful in attributing the nature of the disease that emerges only later. While Friedman detected problems with the “Keynesian” policies of his own time, really, these were made apparent by the actual shape of their success, through which could be recognized the disfiguration of the original intention.

In this respect, Friedman could build upon as well as “correct” what was essentially a Keynesian framework that had established the criteria with which to judge its own deficiencies: the task was to hold Keynesianism to its own standards. Burns finds in Friedman’s own thinking and intentions the criteria for how we must evaluate and judge its apparent failures today.

Just as Keynes’s own “monetarism” laid the groundwork for Friedman’s neoliberal reforms, so must now Friedman’s vision itself provide the lens through which new solutions can be found within today’s configuration of capitalism produced by neoliberalism. Burns warns that in our rush to re-bury Friedman after planting a wooden stake in his dreaded vampire’s heart, we risk entombing along with his troubled memory the resources that could unseal the problem we face in his wake. The blame for our current woes seems a bit too obvious in the Friedmanite legacy we seek to leave behind. But it might lie elsewhere from the place in the rearview mirror we think we have put it to rest. Our lingering fear after moving on from past mistakes is that we are destined to unknowingly make them again.

It is important to note that Friedman intended his proposed reforms to be implemented on the basis of prosperity in the 1950s–60s, not downturn and austerity, but were taken up in a period of crisis in the 1970s that he didn’t anticipate. Friedman wanted to not merely defend capitalism but realize its unfulfilled potentials.

This is why Milton Friedman’s memory haunts us, and why his character as ideological apologist for capitalism threatens to come at the expense of recognizing his true value as capitalism’s reformer. For, as Burns shows, Friedman did not place faith in capitalism to solve its own problems, but actively championed bringing about its potential that would otherwise lie dormant and unrealized. Friedman did not, as his critics tell it, call us to bow down at the altar of capitalism, but rather to take it in hand and make it work better.

As Burns reminds us, Friedman was no mere “economist” running rampant ideologically outside his own narrow province of actual expertise, but his vocation and discipline was actually “political economy,” whose concerns are much broader and wider, and speak to the improvement of society as a whole, in which economics, culture and politics coincide and participate together. Moreover, Burns notes that Friedman’s primary concern was “freedom.” What did this mean?

Friedman’s contemporary Daniel Bell called himself a “conservative in culture, liberal in politics and socialist in economics” to describe his own brand of “neoconservatism,” in which the aim was to preserve the best qualities and potentials of society. Ludwig von Mises denounced Friedman and other fellow members of the Mount Perlin Society as “socialists.” What this meant was their accepting the state as the indispensable agent of economic equality. This is where monetary policy is located, whether Keynesian or Friedmanite — whether old-style “progressive” liberal or later “neoliberal.” Bell’s post-Marxist “socialist economics” was more vaguely elaborated, but still concerned the contradiction Friedman had faced of automation in a society of consumption based on the wage-earnings of work, what Bell called the opposed criteria of “socialization” and “efficiency” in the economy, which he found to be at odds in the inexorable logic of technological advancement, and to which he found the (modern, bourgeois) “culture” he wanted to “conserve” fall victim, in a nihilistic, “trivialized” culture of “‘multiples’ for the culturati,” “hedonism for the middle classes” and “pornotopia for the masses.” Bell found that in the post-WWII world “heterodoxy” and even “antinomianism” has become “conformist” — think *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) — at the expense of any “moral” criteria of “orthodoxy” with which to even be able to judge society’s “adequacy.” A full historical period later, today, after neoliberalism, we face this specter even more starkly, in the form of social disintegration alongside perfected automated efficiency. As in Bell and Friedman’s time, the “ends” of society have been sacrificed to the “means” of capitalism.



Milton Friedman

Burns recalls that the true concern of “political economy” is not only not economic efficiency but also not the mere maintenance of society, but rather its “freedom.” The problem with “economic stagnation” is that it delivers society into a dead end from which the resources of escape are bereft: a lack of freedom.

It should be remembered that Margaret Thatcher’s infamous statement that “there is no such thing as society” was not a denial of society per se, but an attack on the dishonest political rhetoric of “socialism” or “social democracy” by her opponents in both the Conservative and Labour Parties that she thought provided cover for and justified the actual violation in practice of society, the “individuals and families” she sought to champion.

As a true egalitarian, Milton Friedman attributed the necessary freedom to change things not in government or corporate enterprise but among the working people. Friedman’s animus towards the established labor unions, for example, was not in their collective bargaining rights for workers but their betrayal of the latter in collusion with a state-corporate system that constrained — political as well as economic and broader social — choices, at all levels of society. Friedman assailed the “crony capitalism” that resulted from the post-New Deal economic and political order to which the working class had been increasingly subordinated after WWII. The problem today is that the “crony capitalism” remains, while the collective agencies of the working class have declined. But what are those agencies? And are they not still beholden to and collusive with the political-crony state-managed capitalism Friedman sought society’s freedom from? Have they done or been able to do anything at all in the last 50 years — really, in the last century — to stop or even slow the increasing vulnerability and descent of the working class and of the greater society along with it? We may not be happy with Friedman’s proposed solutions or their results, but we can at least agree on the problem: the mismanagement of society by an elite to which we are subject and to whose rule we fall casualty.

The problem is how we see capitalism: is it something over which we can exert control for our benefit; or is it something “objective” to whose reality we must inevitably submit? Burns points out that Friedman despised treating economics as some kind of “hard science” of unchangeable “mathematical” laws, which he considered an abominable intellectual and moral abdication. But the problem remains.

Though we might now see Friedman as an actor on behalf of the elite political management that managed to continue through his policies, we must recognize how his ideas were not only appropriated but hijacked and held hostage to their self-interest — at the expense of the true character of Friedman’s own concerns.

Burns’s book is subtitled “the last conservative.” But Friedman considered himself to be a true “progressive” advocating needed change against an ailing status quo. Indeed he might have been the “last rebel” — to paraphrase Newt Gingrich’s proclamation in the 1994 Congressional election “Republican Revolution” majority he led, the “true revolutionary.” Friedman sought to intervene in the impasse of the 1970s, but ended up as a neutered and banalized ornament gracing a status quo which preserved itself by prostituting his ideas and “revolutionizing” the political and social order only superficially. What Friedman sought to conserve was society and its economic, political and social resources for the prosperity of the working masses of the people, to which he found the capitalism of his time to be invidious. Friedman was the “last conservative” in Burns’s telling insofar as he represented the fading memory of that which the neoliberal reforms of capitalism conducted under the auspices of his ideas accelerated the destruction: the very society of his working-class childhood and its opportunities in the earlier 20th century that Friedman had sought to conserve and whose potential he wanted to realize. The tragedy of Milton Friedman was how he failed through “success.”

The lesson is that intellectuals’ ideas become captive and hostage to fortune in the course of historical events, serving to justify things they were originally formulated to critique and oppose. But their neglected sides might come to the fore later and redeem them in time.

The Epilogue to Burns’s book is titled “Helicopter Drop” and discusses recent economic interventions that seemed to have followed Friedman’s prescription. The phrase is Friedman’s own, advocating direct cash infusions such as was done with the COVID relief payments, but refers mordantly if never explicitly to the atrocity perpetrated by the Pinochet regime of dropping dissident political prisoners from helicopters to their deaths. The point could not be more clear: such “helicopter drops” saved the economy but also brought about the inflation that threatens to undo it. As Hegel said, the very virtue through which a community thrived historically — in this case that of neoliberal capitalism of the last era — becomes the “poison draught” that brings about its downfall, which, not able to be fully realized by its originators, in an apparent reversal is then taken up by its successors. In this instance, it is Friedman’s “conservatism” that, as Burns puts it, “paradoxically,” is providing rather an opportunity today for the “progressive” reconsideration of his legacy and the substance of his thinking and even of his advocated policies, which, again, were hardly implemented by his supposed followers in neoliberalism but might prove more fruitful and in different ways now. This speaks not only to Friedman’s social and political goals but even to his economic theory — where the danger is precisely that the latter seems discredited, but it might be to the ultimate detriment of the former for us to reflexively and unthinkingly accept this apparent verdict of history. In Burns’s view, Friedman might be key to achieving future equality where in his own time he contributed to producing deeper inequities — and even iniquities.

How capitalism has undone society since neoliberalism can be understood well from Friedman’s own theoretical point of view and out of his own concerns. For what Friedman wanted to “conserve” was our freedom to “choose” — and beyond the limited, self-serving and false alternative policies on offer in the existing political order of capitalism, as much now as back then.

Hopefully not in the mere inertia of lack of imagination, but in his neglected, buried and unfulfilled potential: Just as neoliberalism was still Keynesian, post-neoliberalism will still be Friedmanite. **IP**

¹ Daniel Bell, “Foreword: 1978,” in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), xxvii.

“In defense of Palestinian populism,” cont. from page 1

Russian defectors, North Koreans, South Vietnamese, East Germans, royal families in Iraq and Iran, Turks in Central Asia, Uyghurs, Afghans, Iranian liberals, Arabs in Iran, Kurds, Christian minorities in the Levant, Muslim minorities in the Balkans, Georgians, Syrians, Libyans, Islamists, atheists, ex-Muslims, women, sexual liberationists, gays, queers, and of course the Ukrainians. This project of liberation, similar to the project of the Democratic Party within national U.S. territory, is literally regressive in history because it copies the French, British, and Russian Great Imperial Powers, in their interest in carving up their sphere of protectorates for religious and ethnic minorities in Africa and Asia.

Chris Cutrone says that Jews are the exception that proves the rule.⁴ In other words, they are living proof that nations that are not nations could thrive in socialism after the abolition of the capitalist nation-state. Palestinians, ironically, have been for many decades the exception that proves another rule; the European neoconservative liberation project is a sham. The Palestinian “double standard” is living evidence of the European “doublethink.” This is exactly why Palestine attracts Leftist populists like Thomas Fazi, James A. Smith, Yanis Varoufakis, and many others. Palestine has been and still is a point of dissent from the European establishment.

There are three forms of capitalist politics that most liberal technocrats apply when it comes to Israel-Palestine. First, cold symbolic criticism of Israeli policy, which has produced as much useless effect on the course of the conflict as the passionate, moralistic, theatrical criticism of the New Left and its inheritor.

The second liberal-technocratic policy is based upon the priority of the War on Terror over anything else. Western powers have been using the Stalinistic and incoherent terrorist/freedom-fighter distinction in order to pour tons of weapons and stinger missiles into “liberation” movements around the world, all while giving their blessing to Ariel Sharon in 1982 to cripple the PLO⁷ once and for all in his invasion of Lebanon. After 9/11, the liberal-technocratic world stood by idly as Ariel Sharon used the War on Terror as a cover to continue building apartheid in the West Bank. These days, genocide could become the highest form of the War on Terror, and no liberal technocrat is capable of stopping this avalanche.



From CNN’s *State of the Union* interview with Pelosi (2024)

The third liberal-technocratic policy revolves around achieving “peace in the Middle East.” The problem here is that Israel uses “peace” interchangeably with “normalization” and by normalization, it seeks the normalization of its occupation of the West Bank. There has been a bloated liberal-technocratic political economy in Washington, Brussels, and Arab capitals selling the idea that peace is some metaphysical otherworldly goal, more important than world socialism, that would be achieved only if there were real “brave” leaders for ready peace. In mundane reality, liberal technocrats have been for two decades claiming that there should be a peaceful two-state solution while helplessly witnessing the Israeli settlers swallow up the land of the “promised” Palestinian state, nothing could be late-Soviet more than that.

Hence, while Cutrone proposed going against the theatrical and hysterical support of the New Left towards the Palestinians as capitalist politics, I propose adding to the mix the aforementioned three capitalist politics of pseudo-pressure on Israel, the politics of the War on Terror, and the politics of normalization. Once we understand the whole package, we realize that Palestine solidarity is a mere counter-hegemony among others in the liberal-technocratic world, a part of the bigger global hegemony that embraces, accepts, and normalizes the “No State Solution” or the “Palestinian eternal limbo” as one of its ideologies.

After 2016, Trump created a fake veneer of populism that supposedly opposes this “permanent limbo.” It is not the first time “peace populism” has become a political asset for a political leader. Egyptian President Anwar Al-Sadat called the critics of his “peace policy” “nightclub revolutionaries”⁸ (there is a kernel of truth there). Even Israeli leaders have the audacity to pose themselves as populists against a Palestinian elite that “does not care about its own people,” before dramatically whining about the whereabouts of the “next brave Sadat.” However, this populism, like most Right-wing populisms, cannot escape the realities of the “eternal limbo” hegemony, because it challenges the overreaction of the pro-Palestine Left without really challenging the underreaction of the liberal technocrats.



Anwar Al-Sadat, third president of Egypt

In its widest form, this “eternal limbo” hegemony ranges from being indifferent to being openly hostile to the Palestinians, mainly blaming them for the limbo they are powerless over, in an attitude against what Karl Kautsky, in his bitter realism, categorized as societies that do “not lack culture” but only lack the material means and capabilities to stop any foreign domination.⁹ Here are some symptomatic examples of this hegemony:

- Western powers have defunded UNRWA,¹⁰ in a draconian move towards canceling 30,000 jobs with no due process, based on allegations of several of its employees participating in the October 7 raid.

- Ukrainians fight with American and European weapons, and Palestinians die by American and European weapons.

- If you go to a German Unification Day event at some cultural center or embassy nearby, you will not find the Palestinian flag, you will find the Pride flag.

- For the Fortune 500 companies in America, there is Black History Month, not Palestinian History Month.

- Amy Schumer wants Palestinians out of the “dictatorship of the oppressed.”¹¹

- Nikki Haley loves to speak about the victims of the “Axis of Evil” but would never do so in the case of Palestine.

- Christopher Hitchens is one of the few intellectuals who tried, for better or worse, to apply the neoconservative ethos of regime change against Israel, but most of his New Atheist or ex-Muslim colleagues are openly hostile to the Palestinians.

- Abraham Accords supporting intellectuals like Jordan Peterson and Jacob Siegel are selling the anti-Marxist idea that the only path of progress in the Middle East would be through the gates of normalization with the Israeli ruling class.

- Palestine is a subject contentious enough to make Slavoj Žižek, one of the most influential intellectuals out there, write a weak article in *Compact*,¹² one of the most influential platforms out there, in which he promises to “break the taboo” but never does.

- Tucker Carlson was respectful and professional in his interview with Putin,¹³ unlike the interviews of his former employers with Palestinian politicians. The amount of contempt that TalkTV’s Julia Hartley-Brewer had for Mustafa Barghouti,¹⁴ a secular Palestinian politician, could be only compared to the utter disrespect that was shown by her colleagues James Whale and Ash Gould towards Manuel Hassassian,¹⁵ a Palestinian-Armenian former ambassador.

- Chris Cutrone claims that there is some kind of a litmus test at the DSA to exclude you if you do not support Hamas¹⁶ when in reality there has been a litmus test by Piers Morgan of “Do you condemn Hamas?” to know whether to categorize you as a *homo sapien* or not.

- Nancy Pelosi says that the Palestine protesters are Putin agents.¹⁷

- Chris Cutrone claims that the DSA protestors are foot soldiers of the Democratic Party, while Bill Maher and Seth MacFarlane claim that Millennial protestors are throwing abortion and gay rights under the bus of Donald Trump.¹⁸

- ChatGPT considers that Libya has been under Italian colonization, and celebrates its liberation from the Allies in the Second World War, but it is unwilling to recognize any sort of settler colonialism in historic Palestine, stating that it is a complicated and a sensitive political issue.

Neither the Palestine solidarity movement is the overwhelming hegemony nor is it completely an underdog on the margin. In reality, it has become a counter-hegemony in the last decade, benefiting from what Robert Cox calls cracks in the “historical structure” of the Global Order.¹⁹ There is indeed a sort of “civil war” among liberal elites over the current conflict in Gaza, and there are attempts from capitalism to absorb the Palestinian cause as a bourgeois ideology. Nevertheless, that does not mean that Palestinian populism will lose its effectiveness anytime sooner, because winning the narrative war does not mean that the historical-material legacy of the liberal-technocratic betrayal will be removed in the short or the long term, especially with the enormous destruction that was visited upon the Palestinians during this point in history. Israel will win materially and lose morally, Palestine will win morally and suffer materially, and the socialists of the world will not have any material or moral gains.



From Hartley-Brewer’s interview with Barghouti (2024)

Edward Said understood the relationship between support for Palestine and the libertarian tradition of populist dissent in America. He says, “The discrepancy between U.S. policy and a kind of worldwide nostalgia for America is very great.”²⁰ He adds, “as Palestinians, we have not genuinely become acquainted with the presence of the other America, much less of its work and potential.”²¹ He adds,

[the] adversarial and libertarian group is informed and guided by the claims of individual conscience and witness as certified by the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence—that is, those aspects of both documents that stress—as Garry Wills has very cogently argued in a recent book—the communitarian, rational, justice-promoting design of the American republic at its inception. Such a design, then, mitigates somewhat the naked, deterministic, socially bloodthirsty and competitive aspects of individualism also certified by the Declaration.²²

If Said understands the importance of the principles of the American Republic for the Palestinian cause (instead of adopting the embarrassing decolonize-everything discourse), and if Cutrone understands the importance of these same principles for building a socialist movement, then I see it important for the dissident Left not to showcase an abandonment of the Palestinian cause as a gift for the mainstream Left. Instead, it might be valuable for Cutrone to apply his own disobedient methodology in order to extract the kernel of truth from Palestinian populism.



From Whale’s interview with Hassassian (2024)

This populism might be valuable for a Marxist education that overcomes the utterly wrong lessons the Western Left is learning from Palestine while overcoming the liberal-technocratic surrender to the eternal “No State Solution.” This education is important to create a Judeo-Arab Bundism that is essential for a mass socialist movement in America. If we want to make both Palestinians and Jews in America accept “hereness” instead of “thereness,” a Leninist democratic centralist social contract is to be created among the Left, a contract that is clear about doing away with both the “walled-off republic” and the “republic of tunnels,” with both the idea of Zionist domination through nuclear-armed apartheid and the idea of the de-Judaization of Palestine in the name of decolonization. **IP**

¹ “How China’s Rise Has the Middle East Declaring Independence from US, w/ Ali Abunimah,” *Rania Khalek Dispatches* (May 26, 2023), available online at <https://youtu.be/m4jf6Chyz18>.

² “Are We All Terrorists Today? An interview with Fakhry Al-Serdawi,” *Sublation Media with Douglas Lain: Diet Soap Podcast* (October 4, 2023), available online at <https://youtu.be/maxVbqfAW2E>. This article responds to Chris Cutrone, “Israel-Palestine and the ‘Left,’” *Platypus Review* 163 (February 2024), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2024/02/01/israel-palestine-and-the-left/>.

³ Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

⁴ Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

⁵ Chris Hann, “Multiscalar Narrative Identities: Individual and Nation, Europe and Eurasia,” *Politeja* 14, no. 4 (49) (2017): 23, available online at <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323947722_Multiscalar_Narrative_Identities_Individual_and_Nation_Europe_and_Eurasia>.

⁶ “Palestine and the Miseducation of Rashida Tlaib,” *Sublation Media with Douglas Lain: Cutrone Zone* (October 27, 2023), available online at <https://youtu.be/ValmEr3acak>.

⁷ Palestine Liberation Organization.

⁸ Fouad Ajami, “The End of Pan Arabism,” in *Pan-Arabism and Arab Nationalism: The Continuing Debate*, ed. Tawfic E. Farah (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 96–114.

⁹ Karl Kautsky, “Old Style Exploitation Colonies,” in *Socialism and Colonial Policy* (1907), available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1907/colonial/index.htm>.

¹⁰ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

¹¹ See Freddie DeBoer, “Goliath, Who Aspires to be David” (October 16, 2023), available online at <https://freddiedeboer.substack.com/p/goliaths-will-to-be-david>.

¹² Slavoj Žižek, “The Middle East’s Deadly Taboos,” *Compact*, November 15, 2023, available online at <https://www.compactmag.com/article/the-middle-east-s-deadly-taboos/>.

¹³ Tucker Carlson, “The Vladimir Putin Interview,” Tucker Carlson Network (February 6, 2024, published February 8), available online at <https://tuckercarlson.com/the-vladimir-putin-interview/>.

¹⁴ “Israel Blast Beirut: Hamas Deputy Leader Saleh Al-Arouri Killed,” *The Julia Hartley-Brewer Show*, TalkTV (January 3, 2024), available online at <https://www.youtube.com/live/ZWh-M4L3fy0>.

¹⁵ “Israel-Hamas War Latest,” *James Whale Unleashed*, TalkTV (December 16, 2023), available online at <https://www.youtube.com/live/0-nnrzqlzql>.

¹⁶ “The Left, Hamas, and Socialism,” *Sublation Media with Douglas Lain: Cutrone Zone* (October 13, 2023), available online at <https://youtu.be/-6v_4MEI4bA>.

¹⁷ “One-on-one with House Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi,” *State of the Union*, CNN, January 28, 2024, available online at <https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/28/politics/pelosi-criticism-palestinian-gaza-protests-russia/index.html>.

¹⁸ “Stephen A. Smith, Rep. Adam Schiff, Seth MacFarlane,” *Real Time with Bill Maher*, HBO (January 26, 2024). See this clip on the show’s X (Twitter) account: <https://x.com/RealTimers/status/1752423836874911783>.

¹⁹ Robert W. Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory,” *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (June 1981): 126–55.

²⁰ Edward W. Said, “The Palestine Question and the American Context,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1980): 131–32, available online at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41857536>.

²¹ Ibid., 146–47.

²² Ibid., 145.

ICL versus LFI

Who won . . . what?

Daniel Lazare

FOR AN INTERNATIONAL MOVEMENT supposedly fading into irrelevance, the gathering on New York’s Upper West Side on Saturday, January 13, was remarkable: an auditorium overflowing with hundreds of people arguing passionately about where Trotskyism is going and how to get there. On one side were the Spartacists and the International Communist League (ICL), whose U.S. outlet, *Workers Vanguard*, has long been known for its wit, high intellectual tone, and pugilistic style.

On the other were the Internationalist Group (IG) and the League for the Fourth International (LFI), led by Jan Norden, who edited *Workers Vanguard* for more than two decades before being purged in 1996. The IG puts out *The Internationalist*, which comes out four times a year or so and carries forward the slashing, take-no-prisoners style of the old *WV*.

The two groups debated for five hours with occasional breaks for comments from the floor.¹ The exchanges were fierce. Anna Mili, a member of the ICL’s Greek section, accused the LFI of running for cover during the 2015 Greek financial crisis. “The LFI, rejecting the Leninist distinction between oppressed and oppressor nations, refused to oppose American and German imperialism, the main oppressors of Greece,” she said. “This clearly shows that its struggle against imperialist oppression is, like Lenin said, a dishonest façade such as we see in the parties of the Second International. When LFI sectarianism confronted reality, it transformed into social chauvinism.”

To which Norden replied that the ICL/Sparts “have abandoned, renounced, denounced, and vilified one key plank after another in the revolutionary Trotskyist program that the Spartacist tendency upheld against all manner of opportunists for three decades. . . . With its new leadership, the ICL has now reached terminal degeneration so that it renounces the very program on which it was founded.”

Basically, it was a debate over who was more loyal to the original Spartacist mission, who has deviated from it, and, if so, why. Also leading the charge were G. Perrault, a Spartacist leader from Quebec, and Abram Negrete, who formerly headed the Grupo Espartaquista de México,² but who was also expelled and is now with the LFI / Internationalist Group.

So who won? And what, exactly, does winning mean in such a context?

The answer to the first is clear: the LFI. Five years after the death of long-time Spartacist leader James Robertson, the ICL is a sorry spectacle. The movement has been wobbling out of control for years. In 2016, it lined up with the British far Right in backing Brexit. In 2017, it joined the Italian ultra-Right in calling for an “Italexit,” a position that not even a Euro-skeptic like Giorgia Meloni holds to anymore. In April 2020, it posted a cryptic message on its website: “Due to the COVID-19 crisis and the restrictions on movement imposed in New York City, where we are headquartered, the Political Bureau of the Spartacist League/U.S. has temporarily assumed direct administration of *Workers Vanguard* in place of the Editorial Board and reduced the newspaper to four pages instead of the usual eight. We will maintain *WV*’s biweekly frequency.”

Then, except for two or three brief supplements issued by *Spartacist*, its theoretical journal, the group disappeared. When *Workers Vanguard* finally emerged from the rubble nearly three years later, it was vastly different. Its pages fairly brimmed with apologies and confessions. It blamed itself for having gone soft on Bernie Sanders. It said that the entire organization had begun to “implode” and was only now pulling itself back together. After supporting emergency lockdowns at the start of the pandemic, it expressed “revolutionary opposition” to the entire concept.

“It is no secret that the ICL has been politically disoriented for decades,” *Spartacist* announced in another episode of self-flagellation six months later.³ “The pandemic triggered the collapse of our party, but this was only the straw that broke the camel’s back.”⁴ Then came something even more startling: “The fight against Norden was unprincipled, and the expulsions led to two organizations, the IG and the ICL, sharing the same fundamental centrist program and disorientation.”⁵ Where the ICL admitted it was wrong to kick Norden out, its position was that both parties had suffered as a consequence. Now that the Sparts were pulling themselves back up by the bootstraps, it was therefore time for Norden’s League for the Fourth International to do the same. The ICL issued a request for reunification talks — in effect an offer to work with Norden & Co. on a joint program of mutual self-rectification.

Needless to say, it didn’t work. After nearly three decades in exile, the LFI was in no mood for compromise. To the contrary, since the ICL had admitted it was wrong, it knew it had the advantage and was determined to make the most of it. Rather than negotiations, the LFI demanded a debate, the upshot of which was January’s gathering of the tribes.

Much of the discussion on January 13 centered on an incident that precipitated the 1996 rupture, a fracas that erupted when a Brazilian Trotskyist named Geraldo Ribeiro, leader of a local municipal workers’ union in Volta Redonda, an industrial city 80 miles northwest of Rio de Janeiro, moved to expel local police officers from the membership at the urging of the Spartacists back in New York. When local officials raided the union in response and initiated legal proceedings against both Ribeiro and the union, the ICL got cold feet and broke off relations. By way of explanation for its precipitous withdrawal, it published a half-dozen articles contending that the union was never serious about throwing the cops out and that, far from being sued, it was Ribeiro who had sued the union instead.

Both charges were false as the ICL now admits. “The fight that took place against the founding cadre of the IG

in 1995-96 was politically unprincipled,” *Spartacist* said in September.⁶ “Regarding the organizational measures taken against these former members, the record must be set straight. A proper investigation is mandated.”⁷



Volta Redonda, Brazil, November 1988: Army attacked striking steel workers. Three strikers were killed. From the IG’s *Volta Redonda, Brazil* dossier (1997)

LFI’s response was to plunge the knife in further. Negrete pounded away during the debate: “Unions around the world were signing up to defend them in South Africa, in El Salvador, and elsewhere.” Yet “the ICL tried to stop people from defending them. . . . They called the defense campaign a cynical sham . . . and they called the comrades . . . ‘dangerous hustlers.’”⁸ “What’s your line on this? Please respond,” he demanded of Perrault, the ICL leader sitting next to him on the platform. When Perrault failed to answer, Negrete continued mockingly: “‘Well, we’re investigating it.’ One certainly hopes so. One looks forward to seeing the result of those investigations.” It was not a good moment for the ICL.

Nationalism was another topic. Previously, the Spartacist line had been classically Leninist, i.e., hostile to nationalist ideology and Third World national bourgeoisies, but supportive of national equality and independence and convinced above all that self-determination can only be achieved through international socialist revolution. As *Workers Vanguard* put it in 1976:

If the working masses of the various nations are so hostile to one another that it makes unified class struggle virtually impossible, then separation into independent states is called for. Where national minorities choose to coexist within the same state framework, the task of Leninists is to break down all the barriers separating the working masses of the different nationalities. While championing the equality of languages and related democratic rights, we work for the gradual, organic assimilation of the various nationalities making up the working class.⁹

But the Spartacists had chucked all that. In keeping with its pro-Brexit stance, it had adopted a policy of almost hyper-fragmentation. Spearheaded by members from Quebec, it issued a document in 2017 entitled “The Struggle Against the Chauvinist Hydra,”¹⁰ which endorsed Quebec independence, called for all schools to be French, and for all shopkeepers to be required to speak French as well. It accused the “Anglo-Canadian elite” of “bringing to Quebec a steady stream of non-Francophone immigrants in order to submerge the Francophone population in a sea of Anglophones. Just as we are opposed to the call to ‘open the borders,’ we oppose this reactionary policy that contravenes the right to self-determination. We are in favor of immigrants in Quebec integrating through learning the French language.”

Tightened immigration controls? Forced integration? Quebec for the Quebecois? The document also endorsed Basque, Catalan, Scottish, and Corsican independence and called for Belgium to be broken up along Franco-Flemish lines. It even said that Brussels would have to be made over as well because its presence as a French-speaking enclave is somehow an affront to the surrounding Flemish region. “It is hard to predict what will happen to Brussels if the country is broken up,” the document said, “and several possibilities are conceivable.”¹¹ But what could they be — expulsion, mandatory language classes, or what? For some reason, “Chauvinist Hydra” was silent about Switzerland with its four official languages — German, French, Italian, and Romansh — or the Russian Federation with its 190+. It said nothing about Ethiopia with its 70 or more linguistic groups or New Guinea with its 1,073. Do the Sparts believe they should also be broken up? If so, medieval Europe with its thousands of overlapping feudalities, some no bigger than a few city blocks, would be simple by comparison.

“The main enemy of the proletariat in oppressed nations is imperialism and not the national bourgeoisie,” Mili declared at one point in the debate. “Historically, class struggle in Greece is defined and pushed forward by the struggles of the proletariat and the broader masses of the oppressed against imperialist subjugation. It is this oppression and national humiliation that moves the masses.”

The implication is unmistakable: the national struggle comes first, the class struggle second. Said Norden,

Whereas the Pabloites, Mandelites, and so on capitulated to bourgeois and petty-bourgeois nationalists and populists, this new crop of revisions actually are nation-building nationalists masquerading in Trotskyist garb. . . . We saw this already in their 2017 “Hydra” document where, in the name of defending oppressed nations, they tried to present their advocacy of discriminatory, anti-democratic language laws as Leninism on the national question when Lenin emphatically said the opposite.

Pabloites,¹² Mandelites — for those unfamiliar with Trotskyist history, it may all seem obscure. But Marxists have no choice but to deal with the national question since it has only grown bigger and more complex since Marx and Engels began wrestling with it in the 1840s. It was thus the Spartacists who had veered off in a dangerous direction and the LFI which remained true to Leninist principles.

But as to the second question — what winning means in such a context — the answer is more complex. So what if the LFI is coming out on top? What does it matter after so many denunciations and splits? Adding to the confusion was a third faction in the room, the International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT), founded by ex-Spartacists who had left the group in the 1980s. Although not formally part of the debate, an IBT founder named Bill Logan intervened from the floor to bring up an elephant in the room that neither the ICL nor LFI were eager to acknowledge. This was Robertson, the Spartacist founder who led the movement out of the Socialist Workers Party in 1962 and dominated it from then on.

Logan — whom the Spartacists kicked out in 1979 for what they said were abusive practices — began by “propos[ing] a deepening of the programmatic struggle amongst us to reforge and develop the international Spartacist tendency.” He continued:

To understand the programmatic problems of today, you must understand their origins in the past. In the 1970s, fueled by a kind of apocalyptic optimism characteristic of that period, we did some very fine work. . . . But you know by the mid-70s there was a collapse of the optimism, and the contradictions of Jim Robertson loomed larger. He was actually acutely aware of his own increasingly disproportionate role and also of his alcoholism. He sometimes became irresponsible when disinhibited by alcohol and sometimes peremptory and abusive. . . . So there was an apolitical degrading of people. . . . This all left the organization seriously less capable of maintaining a revolutionary program. And we — we — must find some way to get beyond the problems that had their origin back then. We must look at the whole thing, however, as a whole.

This was an understatement. In fact, there was no doubt that the Spartacists had gone through an extremely bad patch. Parallels with Gerry Healy’s Workers Revolutionary Party in Britain are unavoidable. After years of heady expansion, Healy had panicked when it suddenly stopped in the early 1970s. Desperate for funds, he approached Muammar Gaddafi, Saddam Hussein, and the Ayatollah Khomeini for support while promoting a leader cult at home based on physical violence and sexual exploitation. Ironically, Robertson had refused to kowtow to Healy, one of the most pathological figures to ever take part in the Trotskyist movement, when he had tried to bully him into compliance in the mid-1960s. But with remarkable synchronicity, Robertson a decade or so later began tracing the same arc downwards.

To be sure, physical violence does not appear to have been an element, at least not within the organization. But the details are still lurid. In 1998, the IBT published a 7,000-word article detailing the “psychological gang bangs, pre-emptive strikes against potential opponents, frame-up trials, and cop-baiting” that marked Robertson’s later years.¹³ “Norden, in his capacity as editor of *Workers Vanguard*, played an active part in concocting slanders against us,” the article went on. “Yet . . . the IG cadres have stubbornly resisted any re-evaluation or criticism of their own political past. Thus, the Internationalist Group seeks to defend itself against the slanders and unprincipled attacks of the Spartacist League, while at the same time uncritically defending all previous uses of similar techniques by the Robertson regime against others.”¹⁴



From *Workers Vanguard* 669 (May 30, 1997)

The IBT’s argument, in short, was that Norden’s account didn’t make sense because it failed to acknowledge the lengthy pre-history leading up to the expulsion. A 2021 manuscript¹⁵ by another veteran named Jim Creegan painted a picture of the Spartacist movement’s internal life that was even worse. Creegan, who died recently at age 76,¹⁶ described it as an existence marked by overwork, exhaustion, and heavy drinking, one that, ironically, left members with “little time . . . to read or think about politics.” Dues, he said, were

exorbitant, consuming about one quarter to one third of the meagre salary I earned working as a clerk at the *Village Voice*. . . . The local deliberately maintained a regressive dues structure, claiming a higher percentage of earnings the lower they were. This, it was thought, would encourage members to seek better jobs, and hence pay more in dues. . . . Maybe now you can better appreciate why those of us who joined the BT later on were so enraged that Robertson, however greatly he had sacrificed to build the SL in the past, was then having a basement playroom built with our labor for his nocturnal escapades, flying Concorde — many times more expensive than a regular passenger jet — having a hot tub installed (again with organizational funds and labor) in his NYC apartment, and demanding a special contribution over and above dues to buy himself a house in the Bay Area.

Creegan went on: “Drinking parties and orgies (this isn’t a lurid exaggeration) . . . were an important medium of ‘social integration’ in the SL, especially for female members.”

Orgies!?!? If every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way, then the bizarre quasi-families that comprised the Healyites in the UK and the Robertsonites in the U.S. were plumbing depths that were absolutely unique.

Given all this, what are we to make of the January 13 debate, so high-minded on one hand and so evasive on the other? Here is a quick stab at an answer:

The Left paid for a decade of dramatic growth in the 1960s with three decades of neoliberal

stagnation from the 70s on whose only parallel is the three decades of reaction that followed Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo. The wilderness years were devastating for the workers’ movement in all its various forms and manifestations — workers’ states, workers’ unions (the OECD¹⁷ unionization rate plunged 59% between 1975 and 2019), and workers’ parties. The last include everything from the official Communists to Maoists, Trotskyists, and social democrats like the British Labor Party or Germany’s SPD.¹⁸ All came through the experience weakened, distorted, and demoralized — if, that is, they came through at all. While many fought against the tide, all eventually succumbed in one way or another. No matter how tight the organization, strong the ideology, or dedicated and disciplined the cadre, it didn’t matter. If anything, such qualities insured that the crash in the end would be even worse.

But the times are a-changing. 2008 ushered in an entirely different period, one marked by war, recession, economic polarization, and an accelerating shift to the Right that socialists have so far been too weak to stop. The dangers are growing, but so are the opportunities. The international proletariat tripled in size from 1980 to 2000 due to population growth in the industrialized West and the outsourcing revolution in the neo-colonial world and the ex-Soviet bloc. Instead of one billion workers engaged in capitalist production, there were now three — and the years since 2000 have undoubtedly seen further growth as well. The working class expanded even as the socialist movement continued to contract. It’s a contradiction that continues to intensify, yet which must resolve itself one way or another the more explosive political conditions grow.

Given all this, it’s remarkable that the LFI is in as good shape as it is. There were important signs of regeneration and growth at January’s debate — greater energy, greater numbers, and more young people who appear to be solidly working-class as opposed to the Ivy Leaguers who were so prominent in the 1960s. But the Internationalist Group and its various sympathizers must face up to the movement’s troubled past before it can advance to a new stage of development. **JP**

¹ “ICL vs LFI Debate, Part 1: The Fight for the Fourth International Today,” available online at <https://youtu.be/I00wgk6NUCc>; “ICL vs LFI Debate, Part 2: On Permanent Revolution — The Fight Against Imperialism Today,” available online at <https://youtu.be/ATxGhd5rwc>.

² Spartacist Group of Mexico.

³ “Editorial Note: Eighth International Conference of the ICL,” *Spartacist* 68 (September 2023): 21, available online at <https://iclf.org/spartacist/en/68/editorial>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “The ICL’s Post-Soviet Revisionism,” *Spartacist* 68 (September 2023): 12, available online at <https://iclf.org/spartacist/en/68/post-soviet>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See “Lies, Damned Lies and Anti-Union Lawsuits: IG’s Brazil Fraud Exposed,” *Workers Vanguard* 669 (May 30, 1997): 6–7, 9, available online at <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/workersvanguard/1997/0669_30_05_1997.pdf>; “IG’s Brazil Cover-Up: Dirty Hands, Cynical Lies,” *Workers Vanguard* 671 (July 11, 1997): 12–13, available online at <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/workersvanguard/1997/0671_11_07_1997.pdf>; *The Internationalist*’s pamphlet *Responses to ICL Smear Campaign Against Brazilian Trotskyists* (May 2010), which reproduces articles from the time, available online at <https://www.internationalist.org/brazildossierresponsestoiclsmears1005.pdf>; *The Internationalist*’s pamphlet *Class Struggle and Repression in Volta Redonda, Brazil* (February 1997), available online at <https://www.internationalist.org/class-struggle-and-repression-in-volta-redonda-brazil-pamphlet-web.pdf>; and “Recent Correspondence Between the International Communist League and the League for the Fourth International,” *The Internationalist* (October 2023), available online at <https://www.internationalist.org/correspondence-between-international-communist-league-and-league-for-the-fourth-international-2310.html>.

⁹ Joseph Seymour, “The National Question in the Marxist Movement, 1848-1914,” *Workers Vanguard* 123 (September 3, 1976): 6–7, and *Workers Vanguard* 125 (September 17, 1976): 6–7, 11, available online at <https://www.bolshevik.org/statements/ibt_20180120_seymours_marxism.html>.

¹⁰ “The Struggle Against the Chauvinist Hydra: Document of the Seventh International Conference of the International Communist League (Fourth Internationalist),” *Spartacist* 65 (Summer 2017), available online at <https://old.iclf.org/english/esp/65/hydra.html>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See “The SWP and the Fourth International, 1946–54: Genesis of Pabloism,” *Spartacist* 21 (Fall 1972): 1, 4–13, available online at <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/icl-spartacists/1972/genesis.htm>.

¹³ “IG: Willful Blindness: Ex-Robertsonites in Denial,” *1917* 20 (1998), available online at <https://bolsheviktendency.org/1917-index/1917-20-1998/>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Currently unpublished.

¹⁶ For an obituary of Creegan, see Alex Steiner, “A Marxist seeker,” *Weekly Worker* 1470 (December 7, 2023), available online at <https://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1470/a-marxist-seeker/>.

¹⁷ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

¹⁸ Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany).